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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR WILLIAMSON MEETS WITH GON AND NGOS ON
SRI LANKA

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Cherrie Daniels for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In a productive series of meetings on August 24 in Oslo, S/WCI Ambassador Clint Williamson met with Minister for International Development Erik Solheim, a variety of high level Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials, and two NGOs to discuss the recent conflict in Sri Lanka, specifically in relation to a Congressional reporting requirement in recent supplemental funding legislation. Norwegian government officials shared interesting insights into the motivations of the parties to the conflict as well as developments since its end. However they had no specific evidence of atrocities beyond what has been already been shared with the USG. The two NGOs however, did provide useful information from contacts on the ground who communicated with their offices via satellite phone. End Summary.

LEGAL PARAMETERS

12. (C) Before meeting with Minister Solheim, Ambassador Williamson first discussed specific legal and political concerns of the GON with Martin Sorby of the MFA Legal Department in relation to any information which may be shared at later meetings. Williamson began by recognizing Norway's unique role as a mediator in Sri Lanka in recent years. He stated that any information provided by the GON would not be attributed to senior officials by name, and that if desired the Legal Department could see any quotes attributed to GON officials in advance of the report's release.

PREFACE TO ALL MEETINGS

13. (SBU) At the beginning of all meetings Ambassador Williamson first outlined the language attached to the 2009 Supplemental requiring the Secretary to report to the Appropriations Committees within 45 days on alleged violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) during the recent fighting in Sri Lanka and to the extent possible, identify perpetrators. The Ambassador explained that the USG had limited access to the conflict zone and therefore it will be extremely difficult to present conclusive evidence of what happened and who was responsible. To develop the most complete picture possible, the Department was collecting reports from open sources, NGOs, International Organizations, and foreign governments. Looking at the two sides in the conflict, Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Williamson said that reporting thus far had focused on alleged use of civilians as human shields and conscription of child soldiers by the LTTE. For the GSL, most allegations centered on the potential disproportionate use of force and reports of disappearances of individuals during the screening of the population in the north.

SOLHEIM: A "SHOCKING" END TO THE CONFLICT

14. (C) Minister for International Development Erik Solheim, who was involved in setting up the Nordic Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) in 2002, stated that the LTTE had an understanding of international affairs that was "close to zero." He further commented that their unfounded hope for some sort of external salvation, either through pressure from the Diaspora community or other international intervention, combined with a leader surrounded by yes-men, led to the "shocking" and disastrous decision by the LTTE to finish the war as a conventional fighting force. The Norwegian government was in contact with the political leadership of the LTTE until the end of the conflict, but after 2006, only by telephone.

15. (C) Information of particular interest to Ambassador Williamson was the GON's communications with senior LTTE that took place on May 17 and 18 just prior to the conclusion of the conflict. Solheim explained that the MFA had a series of phone conversations with LTTE political and military leaders who wanted to surrender to Red Cross or United Nations representatives. The Norwegians advised them that no Red Cross or UN representatives were in the area and that their only option at that point was to raise the white flag and surrender directly to the Sri Lankan army. The next day, all those persons were dead, and the Norwegians said that the circumstances under which they died remain unknown and implicitly suspicious. At the same time, Solheim and his staff noted that during their conversations with LTTE leaders on May 17 and 18, gunfire could be heard, and their interlocutors admitted shot were being fired by both sides. The fact that they may have tried to surrender under these

circumstances further muddies whether or not this incident could be considered an IHL violation. More generally, the Norwegians found the wholesale slaughter of LTTE forces in the last days of the conflict to be highly suspicious, as "it is most likely that at least some LTTE forces tried to surrender."

NGOS EAGER TO COOPERATE

16. (C) Ambassador Williamson next met with two NGO representatives, Ranveig Tveitnes former country director for Forut, and Nils Mork, political advisor for CARE Norway. Tveitnes, who was expelled from Sri Lanka without an explanation, explained that Forut, and a number of other international NGOs, had local staff on the ground with satellite phones who were able to provide brief but consistent text message situation reports. Tveitnes also would text specific questions to her contact and receive responses. She had compiled the messages from her contact and provided print outs to Ambassador Williamson. Forut continues to be one of the largest NGOs operating in Sri Lanka, feeding 60,000 Tamils per day. Tveitnes also referred Williamson to Guy Rhodes, a Geneva-based employee of the NGO umbrella organization Solidar, who, she said, had compiled reports from various NGOs which had maintained a presence on the ground in the conflict zone, including staff from Oxfam, CARE, Danish Refugee Council, Forut, ZOA Refugee Care, World University Service of Canada, and Save the Children. Ambassador Williamson later called Rhodes, who has since provided the compiled information.

17. (C) Nils Mork of CARE said that the organization had 300 representatives on the ground in Sri Lanka, 95 percent of whom were Sri Lankan nationals. CARE compiled situation reports from staff in the conflict zone once a week, and there were plenty of anecdotes that could be of interest for purposes of the congressionally mandated report. He promised to speak to his director and see if it would be possible to provide this information to the State Department.

GOSL WAS WORRIED MORE ABOUT SOLDIERS THAN CIVILIANS

¶8. (C) After meeting with the NGOs, Ambassador Williamson met with Tore Hattrem, the current Norwegian Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jon Hanssen-Bauer, the Norwegian Special Envoy for Sri Lanka, Wegger Strommen, Norwegian Ambassador to the U.S., Mr. Thomas Stangeland, MFA Deputy Director for Peace and Reconciliation Issues, and other MFA staff. Hattrem summarized the Norwegian view of the challenges to finding out about war crimes: that in all likelihood only 2-3 army officers knew about any given illegal action, that orders were given verbally, that government officials will not give evidence, and that the Tamils are afraid to give evidence. Strommen suggested that although Williamson cannot use information given by the ICRC directly, that information may be used as a cross-check against information gathered from other sources. Stangeland said that the Norwegian government was shocked by the extent to which, in the last stages of the conflict, the Sri Lankan army and government (a) said that its actions were proportionate, which turned out to be false, and (b) violated every guaranteed civilian "safe zone" that was supposedly put into place.

¶9. (C) Several times during the discussions with Williamson, different MFA interlocutors stated that after the fall of Kilinochchi, the safety and security of GOSL soldiers became more important to the GOSL than measures to protect civilian life, and this resulted in various reckless practices, such as shelling villages to terrify and evacuate civilians. Another issue raised several times during the day was the U.S. citizenship or green card status of various GOSL leaders, and the Norwegians asked how pressure could be brought to bear on them through this avenue. Ambassador Williamson emphasized that this fell within the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Justice, which does not comment on its investigations.

¶10. Ambassador Williamson has cleared this cable.
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